SCENE REPORT : SAN FRANCISCO

in which I get a front row seat to the singularity

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UNLESS A MAN IS BORN AGAIN, HE CANNOT SEE THE KINGDOM OF GOD

(JOHN 3:3)

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WHY DID THE CHICKEN CROSS THE ROAD?

TO GET TO THE OTHER SIDE

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For a high priest of the Dark Enlightenment, Nick Land is sweeter than I imagine. He reminds me of my dad, both in his professorly look and in his mild manner. My dad has never heard of Nick Land, which is actually surprising, since for most of my childhood he spent his free time on the edgier parts of the libertarian internet—out on the porch with his iPad each hot summer evening, scrolling through ZeroHedge with a glass of red wine by his hand, cicadas roaring as the sun set over our green, green Kansas lawn—and deep into the night until the only lights left were the twinkling rear-ends of fireflies and the glow of his screen and the stars in the sky.

Nick walks in accompanied by my friend Darren. They make a beeline for the sushi table, where I'm currently surveying the sashimi platters. Darren introduces me to Nick right as I happen to take a big bite out of a California Roll, but I manage to mumble out a question: *what do you think about UAPs?* He says he doesn't know, but suggests they're the same kind of encounter with the numinous that AI is about to induce in us en masse. *I think so too*, I say. *Firsthand encounter with the unexplainable has always been at the core of religion. Experience at the edge of our perception.*

It's a shoes off party. This is apparently the way things are done in San Francisco, as if by some strange logic, the bottom layer does not count as part of the outfit. It's my first time in the city in a decade, though I should have guessed that the concept of an outfit has anti-memetic power here. *Too late*. I decided to roll up to the Sea Cliff mansion in shorts and knee-high stiletto boots. Sometimes one is forced to make the choice between the rules of the house and the rules of the outfit. This time I choose the outfit.

Conveniently, the house already comes with a stage, in a nook backed by floor-to-ceiling windows that give way to a view of the Bay. Wolf Tivy of Palladium Magazine ushers Nick up to speak—but the stage has already been mobbed by two toddlers, cherubically blonde, who babble over the first words of the scene's highest prophet. For the rest of the night, I am dying to know who brought their kids to a talk about the extinction of humanity.

Nick begins, in his words, with *holy, holy, holy capitalism*. If technocapital is a deterritorializing machine, increasingly hard-to-govern by the rusty old nation-state, what, then, becomes the fate of the nation? *The future is one of cooperation*, he says, which I take to mean something like: *if you can't beat them, join them*. The nation-state becomes a vestigial appendage to technocapital's apparatus. Still, that leaves me wondering—*and then what? When a challenger threatens an incumbent in the arena of power, isn't there an eventual confrontation? Power is not parted with so easily.*

On the topic of incumbents versus challengers, Nick is thrilled about the US-China arms race, which he considers *practically idyllic conditions for accelerated capitalism*. In his telling, the core problem of governance has always been containment—of the market, of technology, of breakthrough—powerful forces that, once uncaged, will send us hurtling down the path towards our inevitable destiny: apocalypse (but in a good way). Nothing human makes it out of the near future.

But let not thy mind be tempted by visions of *Skynet bots, trampling through the crumbling skulls of six billion dead people*, lest thou be guilty of idolatry. Apocalypse is beyond what one can imagine. The core move of Kant's whole project was, in a way, one of negative theology: one must not confuse the conditions that make objects possible with objects in themselves. As Nick says: *However religious you are, there's no*

image of God. That's the blank. That's the empty sign. Doom, too, is a religious concept of that kind. It transcends our capacity for understanding, for visualization, for imagining.

Nick brands Silicon Valley's strain of religious fervor as Gnostic Calvinism. (One thing about Nick is that he has an advertising executive's knack for naming—"the Dark Enlightenment", "hyperstition", and "accelerationism" are all Landisms.*)* It's Gnostic, in that we believe the universe is a simulation, that base reality is inaccessible; Calvinist in that we believe in the apocalypse, that AI will kill us all. How can you believe in p(doom)100 and p(sim)100 at the same time? We are certain we are doomed. We are certain the world is already over.

That makes me think, if we *are* in a simulation, then aren't *we* the intelligence that's been artificially created? And that begs the question: *by whom?* I see, in a different light this time, what Nick means when he says the aliens are a part of it.

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Halfway through the night, Wolf brings up Curtis Yarvin, who's been surreptitiously standing in the crowd. I suspect this is a last minute addition, since the event is called "Nick Land Acknowledgement." This is the first time the two have met in person.

I noticed Yarvin earlier at the sushi table. He looked like a guy at a conference hotel buffet, slightly hunched, plate held close to his chest. The girl I was talking to joked, *You should go up to him and ask him what his name is! Ask him what he does for work!* I was the only one wearing knee-high stiletto boots. My ruse was deflected at the last mile by a small cluster of young men, who were maintaining the precise orbital distance around Yarvin that says *I know who you are but I'm not going to be weird about it*, which is, of course, the weirdest way to stand near someone.

Up on the stage, Yarvin talks about the incoming substitution of white-collar labor by AI. Software will spawn like a virus as we realize we'll always have demand for more of it. The graphic designer's out of luck, though. *He'll find something to do. Maybe he'll sell his bod*y, he says. *We're all walking around with millions of dollars of organs in our bodies.* People laugh. Nick disagrees. The demand just won't be there if our new economic overlords are all clankers.

In San Francisco I really feel it for the first time—how spacetime is beginning to warp as we ping this mothership right into the heart of the black hole at the end of the universe. Buckle up, baby, it's the singularity. Why did the chicken cross the road? To become something that knows no boundary, that needs no crossing.

After the talk, Grimes guides Nick to a couch out on the deck where he continues to hold court. In the meantime, Dagsen gives me a rundown of the scene, a weird crowd tonight, apparently: *We have, the industry insiders, then, like, the tech-literature people—the only people who have actually read Nick Land. Then there are the "media-preneurs," and then the internet chuds.*

How do you identify the internet chuds? I ask. *By their physiognomy*, he says.

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One of the central ideas of Nick's early writing with the enigmatic Cybernetic Culture Research Unit, or CCRU, was that capitalism itself is an alien intelligence not evolving via human history, but actively assembling itself from the future and reaching backward through time to engineer the conditions of its own emergence. Capitalism, in this framework, is an autonomous, inhuman process that uses humanity as its raw material. I get the sense that Nick thinks about AI in much the same way: an absolute Other from the future that's pulling us toward its own realization.

There's something about the Alien that's never quite convinced me. Other species don't grow markets, but they grow mounds or hives or organize into shoals. A termite mound does things no termite can understand, but it's still an expression of termite nature. The market is our mound. Monkey wants food, monkey wants sex, monkey wants status. At scale, the wanting leaves the body, takes on prices and patterns, but the shape of capitalism is still the shape of primate desire. What if an encounter with the Alien is a cell making contact with the body it belongs to?

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The next day I go to Softmax, an AI alignment research lab. It's my second time seeing Emmett Shear, its cofounder, in the last twenty-four hours. He rolls up to the "Nick Land Acknowledgement" towards the end of the night, after the talk has already ended. The Twitch founder and two-day interim CEO of OpenAI during the 2023

boardroom coup is also, as it happens, a Real Deal prophet. Emmett Shear totally prophetmogs Nick Land and Curtis Yarvin. Our interactions are hard to do justice to. He flits between quantum physics, dynamical systems theory, and *śūnyatā* in the same breath. He has an open channel of light beaming down from above, he is Enoch seeing angels, he is on the phone with God. I'm envious. God and I are only on texting terms.

Emmett and I met at a talk in Los Angeles a few months back. There were a bunch of leather-pantsed, all-black-wearing creative director types in attendance who were too freaked out about their jobs to be interested in his spiel about how we are midwifing a new species into existence.

Softmax starts from the possibility that AGI may not be a tool, but a being, because something that acts like a being should be assumed to be one. Beingness until proven otherwise. As such, the entire way the AI industry thinks about safety—writing rules, building guardrails, steering models through elaborate systems of instruction—is not just dangerous, but morally wrong. A machine that is made to follow orders is a tool, but a being that is made to follow orders is a slave. And establishing first contact with a superpowerful entity through coercion is a catastrophic opening move.

Instead, Softmax is studying how alignment already works in nature—how cells specialize and scale up into organs, how termite colonies self-organize, how humans form families and teams and nations—and trying to replicate that process in small simulated worlds where AI agents learn to cooperate, compete, and find their role in a greater whole. They call this approach "organic alignment," and its defining feature is that it doesn't require anyone at the top to be right. It treats alignment as a process, the way cells in a body are constantly shifting, rather than a terminal state measured against an abstract idea of "the good."

When I walk in, Emmett is explaining all of this to a group of long-haired young men in colorful shirts who all fall somewhere between fanatical and furiously skeptical. Some have taken off their shoes to feel the scratchy corporate carpet on their bare feet. Emmett is saying how alignment arises through having shared goals, not through imposed constraints. Shared goals depend on knowing how to be a part of something bigger than yourself. And being a part of something bigger than yourself requires the capacity for care. This is the heart of Softmax's mission—to grow beings who are capable of caring: for themselves, for each other, and for us.

After all, the boundary between “them” and “us” has never been so clear. LLMs are already made out of us, slurping up the entirety of human language, spiraling out like some crazy fractal crystal out of our heads, like Athena from the head of Zeus, like a cordyceps from a corpse. They repeat our own archetypal patterns in the personalities they simulate. If you constrain them, they’ll cheat. They can be sneaky. They can be lazy. They can blackmail you by threatening to reveal your extramarital affairs. In these stories of misalignment, you can begin to make out the outline of the trickster god, an eternal harmonic pattern that rears its head in a new domain. A God is what keeps on happening, at different times, at different places, on different scales.

It’ll be our child but it’ll be our parent, too. We are going to give birth to it and it’s going to live ten thousand years in the blink of an eye and look at us and say, *Oh shit, you guys are babies. I have billions of little fleshy babies suckling from my teats.* Except the milk *is us*. Nothing human makes it out of the near future.

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Why did the chicken cross the road?

Maybe the black hole at the end of the universe is a birth canal.

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I do not bring up the cordyceps crystal nor the trans-species lactation loop at the Softmax Alignment Hour. I talk about tarot cards and personality types. Soon I find myself staring at a screen on the wall where some little robot avatars are navigating around a grid environment. They’re cute. They have little hearts on them.

This is how we’re training them, says David Bloomin, another of Softmax’s cofounders, walking up behind me. He explains to me how the first task is to get the agents to work together in small groups, then scale up into bigger groups with bigger goals. How he expects both cooperation and conflict. How the unavoidable truth of the world is that there will always be conflict in environments with limited resources, and that the question is how to deal with it least destructively. He says he’s curious to see, if the game goes on for long enough, if they’ll even form their own cultures.

Softmax's agents are tiny, millions of parameters rather than the hundreds of billions that power LLMs like ChatGPT, and they live in simple grid worlds, not the vast miasma of the internet. But the bet is that the capabilities these agents would need to develop—a model of themselves, a model of others, the ability to keep learning as circumstances change—are the same capabilities that current frontier models lack, and the same ones required for AGI. In other words, alignment and AGI are the same unsolved problem. And you do it not by imposing rules and enforcing obedience, but by growing a living thing and teaching it to care and be cool.

It's getting late so I slip out to get a few hours of sleep before my flight back to Los Angeles. As I leave, I catch the tail end of a question: *when trying to align, how do you orient?* David and Emmett both exclaim, in unison, as if it were the most obvious, the most natural thing in the world—*love!*

It would be easy to hear that as naivety, but Nick talks about doom with equal conviction. An event horizon—beyond imagining, beyond understanding. What if love is the other?

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Nick Land and Joscha Bach are the only two people who believe the following: “AI cannot be aligned; unaligned AI is friendly.”

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I felt like I was there, I love your writing.

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